

Compassionate Christians Should Avoid Suicide-Related Questions, Right?

“What happens to people who kill themselves?”

“Do Christians automatically go to hell if they take their own life?”

“Is suicide the unpardonable sin?”

“Suicide is caused by depression, a disease, so people aren’t responsible, correct?”

“Aren’t sensitive subjects like this best left to medical-health professionals?”

“The term ‘suicide’ isn’t in the Bible, so who are we to judge?”

For years I spoke on college campuses using the theme, “What Lies Beyond?” Interest in the subject then as today remains consistently high. Movies and books on the afterlife, paranormal and the unseen realm pique the interest of millions of all ages.

The movie *Heaven Is for Real*, based on a book of the same title, was a blockbuster in spite of controversial assurance given a mother in the film regarding her deceased son.

The fall TV season opens with ABC’s *Forever*, about a doctor who is immortal. Another is *Intruders*, about a secret society devoted to finding immortality.

The popular *Mentalist* series concluded an episode with a psychic conveying comforting words from his murdered wife and daughter.

And, of course, there has been an almost nonstop stream of understandable, well-intentioned tributes and comments springing from the tragic death of Robin Williams.

"By now, no doubt, Robin Williams is making them chuckle at the pearly gates," is how *USA Today* began its front-page story on Williams' final hours.

"Where is he now?" is the uncomfortable question many of us ask (or silently ponder so as not to appear judgmental or insensitive). We wonder the same thing concerning Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, Amy Winehouse, Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe. Many of us asked this question after the unexpected death of someone close to us, especially if it was an apparent suicide.

When Williams killed himself, celebrities, reporters, politicians and even preachers tried to comfort mourners with comments like the following: "He finally found peace;" "He's up there making God and angels laugh;" "He's gone to a better place;" and, The Academy of Motion Pictures tweeted a sentimental photo of Aladdin hugging Genie with the caption "Genie, you're free!"

Regarding this last comment, Dr. Bill Schmitz, president of the American Association of Suicidology, commented, "Suicide should never be presented by media as a means to resolve or escape one's problems. Contrary to the Academy of Motion Pictures Twitter post, the Genie is not free; the Genie's pain has now been dispersed to a very large audience." How true.

Williams once said, "There is still a lot to learn, and there is always great stuff out there. Even mistakes can be wonderful."

So let's embark on this journey but know that our worldview must be thoroughly biblical. In other words, as Christians our responsibility is to discover the truth as we view all of life through the lens of sacred Scripture.

Williams tragically hanged himself with a belt around his neck. The Bible directs Christians to put on “the full armor of God” starting with the “belt of truth” (Eph. 6:10-13). What brought him death can symbolize life if we embrace the truth.

Personally, I believe when there is an untimely death, it’s wise to withhold comments for a season to allow people time to reflect and grieve. Job’s friends were silent for seven days before they spoke. Eccl. 3 tells us there is a “time to weep... silence, and a time to speak.” Premature comments may prove hurtful and do more harm than good.

A Sensitive Subject—Suicide

Suicide is a choice to intentionally take one’s own life. It comes from the Latin words *sui* (“of oneself”) and *cide* (“to kill”).

In America there is a suicide every 13 minutes. Thirty-eight thousand deaths yearly are attributed to suicide, and the figure is increasing. It’s the leading cause of death among 15-24-year-olds, and for those in their mid-40s to mid-60s there has been a 30 percent increase in the last decade. Ironically, psychiatrists have the highest suicide rate among the medical professions.

People in the Bible who either took their lives or wanted to die includes: Saul, Moses, Elijah, Jonah, Zimri, Ahithophel Abimelech and Judas. Samson collapsed a building on himself, but I view this as martyrdom since he is honored in Hebrews 11 for his redemptive heroics.

Here’s the deal: Suicide is not God’s will, and although it is not the unpardonable sin (unbelief and rejection of Christ), it is a most dangerous and very serious sin. Amidst the worst struggles of life, God always remains “an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Heb. 6:19).

Sadly, there are countless millions who have no relationship with God to avail themselves of His help in the time of need, although some do cry out in their anguish, and only God knows what transpires in those closing seconds. We do well to avoid speculation here.

Others suffer from genuine mental illness, debilitating depression and biological disorders that can cloud/impair their judgment so they do not think clearly and rationally in the throes of their crisis. Yes, suicide is sin, but is it at times a sin not leading to eternal death (1 John 5:17)? Again we need to tread very carefully here.

If a person is genuinely saved as a result of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, family and friends should hold fast to the salvation promise of John 5:24 where a person "has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." Rom. 8:38-39 states, "neither death nor life... shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

On the other hand, Christians should never presume on the grace of God and risk gambling their eternal destiny by suicide. Every one of us should walk in a healthy fear of God as we reflect on warnings in Scripture.

Heb. 10:26-31 cautions about sinning willfully and calls the genuineness of our salvation into question.

Rev. 21:8 declares that murderers (suicide is a grave sin equivalent to murder) "shall have their part in the lake of fire."

"If anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are" (1 Cor. 3:17).

This divine tension in which God keeps us is a beautiful and mysterious thing. He is the Author of life who ultimately has

the authority to give and take this precious gift. We affirm this and say with Job, “I came naked from my mother’s womb, and I shall have nothing when I die. The Lord gave me everything I had, and they were His to take away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!” (Job 1:21, TLB).

Jesus revealed Satan as a “murderer” and the “father of lies” (John 8:44). It is this enemy of our soul who whispers “Life is not worth living “... “I can’t go on”...”It’ll only get worse”...”I’d be better off in the next life”... Yet while the “thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy,” it is Jesus who reminds us, “but I have come that you might have life and have it in abundance” (John 10:10).

Delving Into Depression

Depression is real and, like it or not, it oftentimes stems from sinful choices and consequences. Let’s mention this first before citing other legitimate causes that are not necessarily sin-related. This is critical because too often commentators and counselors attribute suicide only to external causes—things that happen to us or come upon us instead of connecting them to our own wrong choices and sinful reactions.

The cumulative effects of persistently violating God’s holy standards can result in people being crushed and bitter, then blaming God for their fate. “When a man’s folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord” (Prov. 19:3).

Let’s be honest: As our society has drifted increasingly away from Judeo-Christian foundations, suicides have increased dramatically especially among the young and middle-age baby boomers. How much of our pain, suffering and sleeplessness is really sin-related?

Studies show that in Europe the suicide rate has increased dramatically as biblical standards have been discarded over the decades. How much of this pain, restlessness, lack of

peace, stress and infirmity is connected to sinful behavior causing masses to seek medication like antidepressants (as well as alcohol, marijuana and hard drugs) for escape and temporary relief?

Check out the current issue of *Consumers Reports* magazine. The cover story says it all: "America is in Pain—and Being Killed by Painkillers." Prescription-drug use has skyrocketed 300 percent in just 10 years! Sin abounds bringing STDs, aches, stress, back problems, migraines and joint maladies to multitudes who will not obey a loving and holy God.

Millions of people today feel depressed ("pressed down") but don't know why. Depression is not the root problem. The guilt people sense and try to dismiss is actually God convicting us and "pressing down" upon us that we might employ the privilege of confession and cleansing of conscience to find forgiveness and freedom in Him! Read Psalm 32 for the testimony of a liberated man sharing his beautiful redemptive story.

"He that keeps the law, happy is he" (Prov. 29:18). "But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. 'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'" (Is. 57:20). Two dramatic and relevant examples illustrate this point.

Boyhood is a movie currently in the theaters that is extolled by critics as a "Masterpiece!" It's 12 years in a boy's life recorded in real time.

The story unfolds fornication, two divorces, debt, lying, physical and verbal abuse, drunkenness, drugs, profanity, destruction of property, exploitation of women, self-pity, out-of-wedlock birth, deceit, mockery of Christianity, thievery, dishonoring of parents, pornography and a closing scene featuring a woman sobbing in rehearsing her life and saying, "I just thought there'd be more!" The characters' lives apart from God could easily bring them to a place of

suicide. Tragic.

Another film/documentary presently is *The Dog*, the real-life robber behind the *Dog Day Afternoon* movie that starred Al Pacino. The main character is John, a profanity-spewing "Catholic" who has "four wives" and two kids in his "liberated" homosexual lifestyle and lives for sex, sex, sex. Later his transsexual lover wants a sex-change operation, so John robs a bank, an accomplice is killed, ends up in prison, is raped while his transsexual friend outside becomes a prostitute, attempts suicide and dies of AIDS. John is eventually released from prison to stand out in the streets giving autographs while living with his sad, disillusioned mother until he dies of cancer in his 50s. Tragic too.

"The wages (inevitable paycheck) of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). If people don't avail themselves of this gift, then the unfortunate paycheck comes, not always immediately but eventually. Multitudes of deceived people need to be helped in seeing that their problem of depression is self-induced and not something that mysteriously and arbitrarily comes upon folks like measles or the flu.

A man was desperate and depressed. He went to an old buddy who counseled him to go and talk with a psychiatrist. He did but it brought no relief and neither did the meds. So the friend advised him to invest in a therapist. He did but his money was running out and the attempts at coping didn't deliver. Finally his friend told him of a circus in a nearby town where there was a clown who was hilarious and made everybody laugh. The deflated man began to cry and when he looked up he said, "I know that won't work because, you see, I am that clown."

Entertainment Weekly magazine once proclaimed Robin Williams the "Funniest Man Alive." Maybe his long-standing battle with depression was not primarily from the sin factor but from something that unfortunately many don't or won't consider.

The enigmatic, energetic Williams said after undergoing serious heart surgery that the experience left him “feeling like a mortal for the first time in my life, and I didn’t like how that felt.” Resorting to doing more sequels discouraged him and when his attempts at a TV show failed, it was a dark day. Plus paying off two wives was “ripping his heart out through the wallet.”

The onslaught of Parkinson’s disease weighed heavily as it attacks mobility and persona. Someone in his inner circle told *In Touch* magazine, “His last words were, ‘I just can’t take it anymore. The pain is too much.’”

A respected Christian leader and movie critic, Ted Baehr, stated that Williams “accepted Jesus as his Savior in one of the recovery programs, but he was always searching and never quite finding.”

In an interview he said that as he was going through rehab he “knew [he] was not alone, and it gives you a very personal view of God.”

Is Williams in heaven or hell? Did he truly repent and put his trust in Jesus Christ alone as both his risen Savior and Lord, which is what the Bible teaches as essential for salvation ()? What really happened and did he talk tenderly and remorsefully to God in those closing minutes as he tightened that belt around his neck to choke out his final breath?

Only in eternity will we know the answers to these questions. As Billy Graham once said, “When we get to heaven we will be surprised at who is there, and we will also be surprised at who is not there.”

In closing, let’s capitalize in a redemptive way on this heartbreaking episode to engage the lost and unchurched in conversations proving that compassionate Christians *don’t* avoid suicide-related questions. The tragedy provides a natural conversation-starter for divine appointments in our

life. But look beneath any smiling veneer and projected image. "Laughter can conceal a heavy heart, but when the laughter ends, the grief remains " (, NLT).

Farewell Robin Williams (1951-2014). We hope we'll see you again.

[Note: Part 2 next week].

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